DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 939 CS 505 326

AUTHOR Frana, Adrian W.
TITLE Information Processing in High School Debate: A Superior Emphasis.
PUB DATE Aug 85
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the National Forensic League Conference on the State of Debate (Kansas City, MO, August 8-10, 1985). For related documents, see CS 505 325-327.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Critical Thinking; *Debate; *Decision Making; Definitions; High Schools; *Logical Thinking; *Persuasive Discourse; School Activities; *Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Communicator Style

ABSTRACT

The style of high school debate should emphasize information processing above all other skills. Debate, as an intellectual educational activity with a basis in scholarship, is not an end in itself but a means to the acquisition and refinement of useful skills that deal with reflective thinking and critical decision making, on both personal and public bases. Information processing, as a skill of debate, refers to a manner of arguing that emphasizes the use of research on a question and to argumentation that stresses analysis and supporting data. It is also decision making based on the primacy of information, along with its interpretation and communication, and on reasoned discourse leading to reflective judgments and critical decision making. As a skill in debate, information processing involves conducting research, drawing upon analysis, and advocating a position based on both of these activities. The paper concludes with a discussion of six ways is which the debate community, especially judges and coaches, can ensure that debate can fulfill its primary function of providing maximum benefit to students. (SRT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED272939

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Information Processing in High School Debate: A Superior Emphasis

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Adrian W. Frana

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Presented to the
National Forensic League Conference
on the State of High School Debate

1985

Adrian W. Frana
Rich East High School

CS 505 326

Dealing with a question of what should be the style of high school debate may have significant portents. Controversy over the style of school debate is likely as old as the debating itself. The style of debate may, deservedly or not, be at the crux of what is happening in the activity, affecting a number of facets.

The style of debate is what the public--meaning parents, school administrators, and other teachers--most fully and readily perceive, both in actual rounds and in externalities, such as sample cases, jargon, and verbal behavior of debaters in non-debate settings. The style could be why debate does not have much of a public other than those mentioned. Style can be linked to intensity, narrow specialization, select audiences, and perhaps even the odd hours at which debate is conducted. Finally, style is what many ex-coaches and ex-debaters react rather strongly against, why they are no longer with the activity. "I liked the idea of debate, but I could not go along with that style" may be a comment heard time and again. Another might be: "Why they (debaters) have to persist in using that style is beyond me." The style emphasized in debate is derived largely from the skills emphasized by its participants.

A discussion of the style of school debate refers to its manner, the way in which it "is made or done."[1] We concern ourselves with how the participants make a debate happen, from the time the topic is announced to the completion of a round of

competition. The manner in which participants conduct the "critical deliberation"[2] of a matter of public policy through organized competition is the province of the style of academic debate. How a round is conducted is the manifestation of that style, but it goes beyond that round--to preparation, to evaluation, to reinforcement (and repetition), and perhaps to carry-over traits and practices. The style of debate is distinct from the nature of debate, but the two areas are related. Moreover, the view of the nature of debate can and does affect the style of debate, as will be seen later.

Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to argue that the style of high school debate should emphasize information processing above all other skills. It is important that a careful, scholarly process be followed in defining "information processing," a term that is bandied about the high school debate community, yet it is suspected that few who use the term have a firm grasp of the concept. Examination of a variety of sources confirms the suspicion that "information processing" has a meaning for debating that is unique to its participants. Many definitions found elsewhere hardly seem applicable. Compounding the difficulty is the likelihood that the term is used to cover a variety of perspectives and practices. Except in general terms, it lacks a universally accepted meaning in the debate community. Also, it may well be regarded as more of a style of debating rather than an acquired skill.[3]

Consultation of scholarly sources for a definition of information processing provided no acceptable answer. The

Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought asks the reader to check the definition of "computing."[4] A political science dictionary does not define it but does discuss "information theory" in terms communications theory applied to political systems.[5] A dictionary of education does not include it among its entries.[6] A legal thesarus defines "information" and "process" but not "information processing."[7] The McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Scientific and Technical Terms definies it as: "1. the manipulation of data so that newer data (implicit in the original) appears in a useful form. 2. See data processing."[8] The Fifteenth Edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica defines it in the Micropedia as: "techniques by which information is collected, stored, and made available."[9] The Macropedia article starts out by noting: "This article cuts across many disciplines, technologies, and activities concerned with processing information for organization, storage, communication, and use."[10] Scholarly articles on debate theory and practice do not define (or even discuss to any significant extent) information processing but more likely deal with information theory. Dale Hample's obervation is likely representative: "The first potential model /for argument_7 is taken from information theory, which has been influential in the overall study of communication but is not often thought of in connection with argumentation."[11]

All of this is mentioned to show the lack of precision in applying this term to debating. Approaches to defining other than through dictionaries are possible, but in this case all seem less than ideal. Using an operational definition would

surely open a Pandora's Box. Anyone connected with the activity can conjure in their minds an example of what this skill entails from a debate observed and/or endured, but are such examples representative and, more important, descriptive? A great variety of definitions would result. A delineation of the traditionally-phrased skills taught by participation in debate is also possible, but some might object to the "cookie-cutter" approach as they do in checking the boxes denoting skills on that particular AFA ballot. They believe, with some justification, that the approach causes problems because of the overlap of the skills. Resorting to the traditional dichotomy of debate as research versus communication might also be attempted. This perhaps comes the closest to being accurate since examining the nature of debate forces consideration of what the activity is supposed to be teaching. However, a number of writers have found this dichotomy to be suspect. One such writer observed, ". . .the strongest case for defining the nature of debate is found somewhere between the communicatin and research emphases."[12] In this case the problem is not with information but with processing. Is the research processed, that is, communicated? Again, it would seem less than productive to utilize the reserach-communication duality when skills may duplicate and overlap (cross-apply?).

Arrival at a definition by breaking new ground and then providing arguments to have that skill as defined be declared primary to the activity must be predicated on a philosophical approach to academic debate. Debate is seen by the writer as

an educational activity of a highly intellectual nature with a basis in scholarship. It is not an end in itself but a means to the end of providing acquisition and refinement of useful skills to its participants, skills dealing with reflective thinking and critical decision-making, both on a personal and public basis. Considering Ehninger's definition of school debate as "a practical exercise in public persuasion,"[13] the applications of the skills acquired through debte should conform to real-world demands. Another important consideration is provided by Brockriede and Ehninger when they define debate as "a method of decision" which "provides for the vigorous examination and testing of pertinent data and inferences through the give-and-take of informed controversy."[14] Debate, then, is a method of decision-making. It inculcates an attitude which features a respect for facts, cooperative investigation into a matter of controversy, testing positions by clash with adversaries, cognition of varying interpretations as possibly valid, and willingess to submit to the decision of an adjudicator.

Looking, then, to a definition consistent with the goals of academic debate, the writer ventures a working definition. Information processing, as a skill of debate, refers to a manner of arguing that puts primacy on the use of research on a question, the use of argumentation with stress on analysis and supporting data. It is decision-making based the primacy of information along with its interpretation and communication. It is reasoned discourse leading to reflective judgements and critical decision-making.

This definition--or attempt at one--puts the handling of acquired facts and their interpretation as the most important skill as an outcome of the debating experience. It would seem to apply more to policy debate as value debate appears to de-emphasize information and its application. The subject matter or width of the topic for debate are not of great importance; what is deals with the way the topic is argued. Stress of this skill does not seek to belittle or exclude others, simply to give less emphasis by comparison. The skills involved in information processing are not necessarily unique to another style of debating but come to the forefront under this definition.

Information processing as a skill is easy to misconstrue in theory and more so in actual practice. The ideal involves three major stages; those who would take shortcuts curtail one or two of them. The next section proposes to outline those stages, showing the complete picture. Eventually contrast will be provided to those practices which are incomplete, information processing by claim only.

As a skill in debate, information processing involves the conduct of research, the drawing upon analysis, and the advocacy of a position based on both. The stage of research is a continuing process, entailing the discovery of pertinent facts and interpretations of the topic under debate. Such a step is undertaken in scholarly manner with fullness and accuracy of citation. completeness of source documentation, regard for context, and evaluation of source credibility. The stage of analysis, also a continuing process, entails sorting and organizing the information

gathered, making needed interpretations and evaluations, and putting it in meaningful form(synthesis).Information (data) is drawn together to arrive a meaningful, supportable claims. The process of critical judgement is used throughout--sifting through the facts, interpreting them, organizing them, evaluating them. From this evolve reasons to support or defeat the resolution. The stage of advocacy then entails bringing the research and analysis steps together and utilizing the fruits of those labors to present reasoned discourse, communicating that information and its interpretation to adversaries and adjudicators. Such discourse features clashing with opposing arguments, using analysis and data to provide claims which adversaries cannot counter satisfactorily and which the adjudicator finds superior. Each of these stages, including advocacy, necessarily feature trial and error, involving a return to research, re-structuring of arguments, revisiting of concepts, and revision of statements. True scholarship, of course, is really not that orderly anyway. The Reverend Timothy S. Healy, SJ, President of Georgetown University, once observed: "Scholarship in which facts stay in line or ideas in order is either vulgarization or echo."[15]

An information-processing emphasis puts scholarship foremost in the debate process. The end product is the educated citizen, ready to function in society, using the tools of scholarship to grapple with an imperfect world.

Emphasis on information processing is a superior approach because of the critical thinking skills acquired.[16] Such skills,

nowhere as readily acquired under another approach, are invaluable and give the participant a head start over colleagues who have not had such training. The skills gained through information processing--the discovery of pertinent facts through original research, the analysis of a policy question, the advocacy of superior arguments requiring on-the-spot analysis and retrieval of acts, command of information and utilization to one's advantage--are pertinent to demands of the real world. Decisions must be made--personal, corporate, professional, public. Those participating in this form of debate are better prepared to make and defend them.

The approach is superior because it is grounded in scholarship. Participants act much like the scholar in conduct of research, analysis of what was discovered, synthesis of that body of knowledge to a viable position, and advocacy of those findings. Like the scholar, the debater employs intellectual rigor, possesses mental vibrancy, and gains an ability to think for oneself.

The approach is superior because it meets educational goals, both traditional and modern. Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives provides a classification of learning steps for developing a curriculum based on educational goals or outcomes. According to Bloom and his colleagues, those outcomes are: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.[17] These steps in becoming educated closely match what the business of information processing is

about--what the debater engages in on the road to successful competition. More recently, The Paideia Proposal places much stress on developing students' ability to think for themselves: "Only the student whose mind has been engaged in thinking for itself is an active participant in the learning process that is essential to basic schooling."[18] Mortimer Adler and his Paideia Group define what students should be doing as they are educated. They question the present system of learning: "But when have their minds been addressed, in what connection have they been called upon to think for themselves, to respond to important questions and raise them themselves, to pursue an argument, to defend a point of view, to understand its opposite, to weigh alternatives?"[19] Debate via pursuing an information-processing emphasis would seem to produce exactly what the Group calls for. Perhaps most critically, the Paideia Group sees the best kind of teaching as coaching: "A coach does not teach simply by telling or giving the learner a rule book to follow. A coach trains by helping the learner to do, to go through the right motions, and to organize a sequence of acts in a correct fashion. He corrects faulty performances again and again and insists on the repetition of the performance until it achieves a measure of perfection. . . . Only in this way can the ability to think critically--to judge and to discriminate--be developed."[20] While Adler and his associates refer to athletic-type coaching, it does no injustice to their intent to relate their model to what is done in debate--coaching a student in sort of a tutorial setting.

Other approaches, even though they may be called information processing by their perpetrators, fall short. By definition, approaches which put limitations on evidence read other than what can be reasonably communicated in competition; which seek to overwhelm opponents on sheer weight of information; which avoid clashing with opponent's arguments; which make no critical judgements about information used; which feature no thought in composing, selecting, or adapting argumentation cannot be called information processing. Nor certainly can an approach which puts a premium on persuasive speaking, calling for a neat, orderly presentation with a high degree of fluency. The content may be shallow; the information base may be inadequate or marginal at best; however, the student sounds great and, on the surface, makes a case.

Those who claim to practice information processing but without going through the required stages do the term a disservice. From such debating come practices of dubious or little educational value. They include:

--generic disadvantages, good for any topic;

--completely unreasonable claims, often serving as strategic time wasters;

--stylistic practices designed to maximize information flow at the expense of aesthetics and often of communication.

--next to no source citation;

--minimum clash, with a premium put on dumping out arguments so that opponents lose on a lack of coverage;

--invention becoming a lost canon of this rhetorical activity with debaters increasingly relying on prepackaged materials from the workshops or from college students serving as assistant coaches.[21]

These approaches ultimately fail in training a student to think for him/herself, to engage in the complete decision-making process. They fail because there is insufficient mental activity, a lack of thinking, adjusting on the spot, actually understanding what is being argued; because there is no meaningful training in repeating prepared materials round after round; because there is a lack of true scholarship in actual research and development of arguments and their extensions; because there are anti-scholarly practices in permitting shallowness of analysis, in failing to provide or even to have available complete source citations, in using materials one had no hand in preparing; because there is a lack of substance in arguing rules or prepared responses designed to prevail only through coverage; because there is a lack of application to real-world advocacy where one does not always have a specialized audience.

Such approaches stifle thought or, to paraphrase Father Healy, vulgarize or echo. The student under such approaches does not fully use the mind. A sort of sophistry results from these methods, remarkably similar to the decline of oratory during the Roman Empire which featured an over-emphasis on aesthetics in speaking and the declamations of the Greek Second Sophistic. Quintilian's writings, interpreted by M. L. Clarke, pointed to a reason for the decline of excellence in pleading in the courts of law: "The product of the schools brought with him to the courts a distaste for serious argument and a preference for what was easy and attractive."[22] While numerous debates the writer has evaluated in recent years may not have been objects of beauty, the notion of declamation came to mind rather frequently.

Information processing, properly applied, provides a debate which stimulates participants and observers alike, which deals with substantive matters, which features spontaneous adjustment and adaptation, and which features arguments understood by speaker and listeners alike.

It might be asked: where is the emphasis on information processing? Why is what is described here not what is practiced by so many participants?

As so often found in many areas of endeavor, what is ideal is far removed from what exists. What is theoretically sound is not always found in practice. There are some reasons why such disparities exist in high school debate. Some stem from harsh realities with which many debate programs must deal; others can be traced to human weaknesses.

Most debate programs are forced to grapple with three realities. First, there is the information explosion. Students in the late twentieth century, particularly with greater access to computers, simply have avail to increasing amounts of information which is being increased faster than ever before. Programs are faced with the decision of what do about information--use a lot or just a little. Second, time is a scarce debate resource with talented students wanting to maintain classroom excellence and engage in other worthwhile activities as well. Third, debate competes for dollars and attention with other activities, sometimes in a vicious cycle. In some schools, trophies attract attention and lend some justification for spending money. Taking shortcuts or emulating an approach used

by some affluent, "successful" programs, therefore, become temptations not easily overcome.

Programs also have coaches and students who are, above all, human beings with human frailties. Approaches other than strict adherence to information processing as defined here are easier. Coaches cannot expect students to know any better; they will adopt the approach that does not require the long hours and intellectual demands. Coaches also find such other approaches easier to handle. It takes less strain to operate a xerox machine or have a student watch a videotape of him/herself than to evaluate arguments in practice rounds and work sessions. Ordering and disseminating handbooks would also be more facile than supervising and participating in research sessions. Then there is the matter of ego. Participants--coaches and students--lose perspective on the activity; winning tournaments becomes an end in itself. And, of course, winning rounds means appealing appropriately to judges. Some judges (mostly older) want a pretty speech and do not want to be confused with too many facts. Other judges (mostly younger) want as much factual information as can be crammed into a speech. Students before and in rounds confront the question: should they debate the way learning is maximized, or should they go for the judge, regardless of what is needed? Even people not closely acquainted with the dynamics of debate know the answer. Another item is that of money. College people, enterprising souls that they are, realize that a profit can be realized from selling handbooks and holding institutes, some of which produce and utilize evidence in great

quantity without much regard to understanding. High schools with large budgets for debate can buy winning seasons, so why expend work and work when one can play it safe? Finally, politics on the debate circuit rears its ugly head here and again. Coaches with sway hold that there can be no other approach to debating but their way and woe to anyone who crosses them. Their judges will take care of anyone who threatens their style, not meeting their expectations or emphasis.

It might further be asked: how can the debate community come closer to uniting theory with practice? Can these barriers be overcome? Can we deal with the realities and overcome weaknesses? Perhaps it can happen, but it will take determination as well as some sacrifice.

The first thing to do is ask some simple questions. What are students gaining from debate through a particular emphasis? Is learning taking place? If so, what kind? What are the student outcomes? What can the students take from this experience and translate to the classroom and then to society with them in it?

The next thing to do is apply these questions. What the students gain from debating must be put first and foremost in the debate director's considerations. It must apply to all decision-making in terms of placing students in workshops, if at all; in other preparations for competition; in tournaments selected; and in judging, one's own and preparing hired judges. Judging must receive special emphasis. Judges secured must be judges who are teachers first. They are above all critics of argument,[23] helping a student learn from the experience, intervening in the

argumentation if needed. After that, they can pick a judging paradigm. It takes some courage to shy away from workshops and tournaments which do not reflect an emphasis on information processing in its true sense, but otherwise students are cheated.

The third thing to do is inculcate an attitude by example. Respect for facts and other points of view, acceptance of alternate interpretations as possibly valid, willingness to suspend judgement until the facts are in, not taking losses personally, using setbacks as experiences upon which to improve are just a few aspects. Students are better off with such an outlook.

A fourth thing to do is integrate the debating experience with the curriculum. Debate and the skills acquired through the information-processing emphasis should become part of the curriculum, letting administration, colleagues, and non-debate students realize what tremendous learning there is to be had under this approach. Failing that, the program should be conducted on a basis as closely integrated with classroom learning as possible, seeking ways to relate classroom knowledge into debating and skills acquired in debate into classroom performance.

A fifth thing to do is to branch out the experience. Certain weekends should be set aside for innovative, alternate approaches. Audiences willing to be stimulated through an exercise in informed controversy should be sought out. Coaches should enter policy debaters into student congress and have information processing utilized in a different forum. Again, this takes some dedication and determination, but the students' experience is enhanced.

As a final step, coaches should put themselves to the test. They should ask what they are in debate for. Do they seek to educate or just pay lip service to it? Are they forensic educators or sycophants? Are they afraid of student outcomes as a criterion? What sort of resource do they provide to their students?

In summary, information processing should be emphasized, coaches must insist on the genuine article and accept no substitutes. The emphasis must exist for what it can do for students. Shortcuts shortchange students.

Endnotes

[1]Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Second Edition (New York: World Publishing Company, 1968).

[2]Lee Grannell, "Forensics and the Department of Speech Communication: A Counter-Reform Approach," Journal of the American Forensic Association, VIII (Spring, 1972), p. 186. Grannell cites widespread acceptance of Douglas Ehninger's definition.

[3]James H. McBath, ed. Forensics as Communication (Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook Company, 1975), p 23; Adrian W. Frana, "Is Debate a Communication or Research Activity?" Journal of the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association, XXXII (1978), p. 41.

[4]Allan Bullock and Oliver Stally Bross, eds. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

[5]Jack C. Plano and others, Political Science Dictionary (Hinsdale, Ill.: The Dryden Press, 1977).

[6]Gene R. Hawes and Lynne Saler Hawes, eds. The Concise Dictionary of Education (new York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1982).

[7]William E. Burton, ed. Legal Thesarus, Deluxe Edition (New York: Macmillian Publishing Company, Inc., 1980).

[8]Third Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1984).

[9]Micropedia, Vol V (Chicago: The Encyclopeida Britannica Company, 1980), p. 343.

[10]Ibid., Macropedia, Vol. 7, p. 567.

[11]"Modeling Argument," in Advances in Argumentation Theory and Research, J. Robert Cox and Charles Willard, eds. (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), p. 281; An article that discusses the implications of information theory on the amount of information one can communicate in a debate round is Virginia Eman and Jeffrey Lukehart, "Information Use in Academic Debate: An Information Theory Perspective," Journal of the American Forensic Association, XII (Spring, 1976), pp. 178-183.

[12]Frana, p. 43.

[13]The writer has never seen this definition in any of Professor Ehninger's publications, but he did use the definition in classes at the University of Iowa.

[14]Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede, Decision by Debate (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1966), p. vii.

Endnotes, cont.

[15]"In Defense of Disorder," Newsweek, CI (May 23, 1983), p. 11.

[16]Two studies reporting positive relationship are: William S. Howell, "The Effects of High School Debating on Critical Thinking Ability," Speech Monographs, X (1943), 96-103 and Richard C. Huseman, Glen War, Charles Gruner, "Critical Thinking, Reflective Thinking, and the Ability to Organize Ideas: A Multi-Variate Approach," Journal of the American Forensic Association, VIII (1972), pp. 261-295.

[17]Benjamin S. Bloom and others, Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1956), pp. 187-193.

[18]Mortimer J. Adler, The Paideia Proposal (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1982), p. 32.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid., p. 27.

[21]Adrian W. Frana, Unpublished paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Chicago, November, 1984.

[22]M. L. Clarke, Rhetoric at Rome (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1963), p. 104.

[23]V William Balthrop, "The Debate Judge as 'Critic of Argument': Toward a Transcendent Perspective," Journal of the American Forensic Association, XX (Summer, 1983), pp. 1-15. Balthrop makes the case in this article for limited judge intervention in the argumentation.